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Intensification of Workplace Regimes in British Horticulture: The Role of Migrant Workers

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Abstract:

In Britain, international migrants have very recently become the major workforce in labour-intensive horticulture. This paper explores the causes of the dramatic increase since the 1990s in the employment of migrant workers in this subsector. It locates this major change in a general pattern of intensification of horticultural production driven by an ongoing process of concentration in retailer power, and in the greater availability of migrant workers, shaped in part by state initiatives to manage immigration.

The paper draws on concepts developed in the US literature on agrarian capitalism. It then uses case histories from British horticulture to illustrate how growers have directly linked innovations involving intensification through labour control to their relationships with retailers. Under pressure on 'quality', volume and price, growers are found to have ratcheted up the effort required from workers to achieve the minimum wage through reducing the rates paid for piecework, and in some cases to have changed the type of labour contractor they use to larger, more anonymous businesses. The paper calls for further, commodity-specific and spatially aware research with a strong ethnographic component.

Keywords: migrant workers; horticulture; British agriculture; piece rates; gangmasters; labour contractors

INTRODUCTION

In Britain, international migrants have very recently become the major workforce in the labour-intensive tasks of harvesting, packing and primary processing of relatively high-value products such as fresh fruit, vegetables, salads and ornamental shrubs and flowers (Frances, Barrientos and Rogaly, 2005). This paper exposes the causes of the dramatic increase since the 1990s in the employment of migrant workers in this subsector. It locates this major change in a general pattern of intensification in horticultural production driven by an ongoing process of concentration in retailer power, and in the greater availability of migrant workers, shaped in part by state initiatives to manage immigration.

The roles of the state, of market relations (along the supply chain) and of local social and spatial relations in shaping workplace regimes across sectors have together been conceptualised as social regulation by Peck (1996). Social regulation has also been used specifically for the analysis of change in the agriculture and food sector (Lowe *et al.*, 1994; Flynn and Marsden, 1995; Marsden and Arce, 1995; Goodwin, 2006). Regulation is seen as

being practiced at different scales and by a range of actors, including the local and national levels of the state, and private business interests. As Flynn and Marsden argue, ‘at a conceptual and empirical level, we can begin to distinguish between more traditional regulatory styles based upon notions of the “public interest” and an emergent private interest style of regulation’ (1995: 1185-6). In Britain, a critical part of this movement toward regulation by private interests has been the changing power relations among private actors, ‘the fundamental shift of power...in the food industry away from manufacturers to a small number of rapidly expanding retail corporations’ (Marsden *et al.* 1996: 365; see also Wrigley, 1987; Lang and Heasman, 2004).¹ However, in spite of these perceptive analyses of the key ways in which private corporations and the state have influenced the production decisions of horticultural businesses in Britain, little attention has been paid to associated changes in horticultural workplaces themselves: in the relations, that is, between wage workers, labour contractors such as gangmasters, and grower and packer businesses.²

It is only in relation to the US that a large body of literature exists connecting social regulation by large-scale capital and the state with changing workplace regimes in labour-intensive *domestic* agriculture.³ In this paper, I draw upon some of the conceptual advances made by these studies to raise questions about changing workplace regimes in British horticulture and, in particular, to help to explain the rapid growth in the employment of migrant workers in the sector.

CAPITALISM IN HORTICULTURAL SUPPLY CHAINS

How capital reproduces itself and accumulates in agriculture and horticulture is in part a matter of definition. For Mann (1990), the defining feature of capitalist labour relations is the use of hired wage labour. It is the surplus value of this labour which accrues to capital. Mann’s theory is under-girded by Marx’s notion of the non-identity of production time and labour time in agriculture, the associated periods of idleness (of labour and machinery), and the resulting slower turnover of capital than in, say, manufacturing industry. Taken together, these factors limit the value that can be accumulated by capital from agricultural production processes.

More recent work locates capital accumulation in agriculture away from the production site, for example through lending money to growers (Henderson, 1998) and marketing agricultural produce (Guthman, 2004; Morgan *et al.*, 2006). One important form of innovation by agrarian capital faced with obstacles to accumulation is *intensification*. Importantly for the analysis that follows, Guthman not only argued that intensification is ‘broadly characterised by efforts to speed up, enhance or reduce the risks of biological processes,’ but that ‘*even some nontechnical innovations in labour control can be considered intensification..., for example, the use of vulnerability to ensure a timely and compliant labour force come harvesttime*’ (*ibid*, 65: emphasis added).

The research reported in the section that follows is aimed at unpacking such innovations in labour control, in particular the use of foreign nationals in the workforce. It examines the extent to which such intensification is connected to the relationship between retailers and growers. The analysis makes use of the concept of workplace regime, which encompasses the whole set of labour arrangements (see Rogaly, 1996) made, largely by employers, with varying degrees of negotiation with labour contractors and workforces, and in response to wider labour market, legal and commercial conditions. These arrangements include decisions about whom to employ with regard to nationality, immigration status, gender, age and skills. From the perspective of employers, particular kinds of worker may be considered suitable because of their acquiescence to (or compliance with) tasks set and working norms, their degree of willingness to commit to a pre-determined programme of work (or alternatively to come to work without pre-set end times), and the ease of disposing of them when they are no longer needed. The arrangements also involve decisions over whether workers are employed by a labour contractor (gangmaster) or directly by the grower, the conditions of work and divisions of labour between roles and between work sites, and how much room for manoeuvre exists in practice for workers to move between them; the amount, form and basis for remuneration (piece rate or time rate, weekly or daily, cash or electronic); accommodation and transport arrangements where relevant; hours and days of work for each worker and the degree of control the worker, labour contractor and grower have over them; methods of supervision and quality control; and informal and formal relations between individual workers, groups of workers and labour contractors and the grower.

I focus on three aspects of changing workplace regimes in contemporary British agriculture, which may be expected to indicate intensification: the employment of international migrant workers, the 'return of the gangmaster' (Brass, 2004), and the use of piece rates. All three can be interpreted as non-technical innovations in labour control of the kind identified by Guthman, that use vulnerability to ensure compliance in the labour force. Evidence which follows does indeed suggest that all three are indicators of intensification. However, as we shall see, care is required in interpreting this because of the diversity of interests involved.

The main sources of data for this paper are case histories. Faced with the daunting prospect of accounting for diversity between regions, commodities and types and sizes of grower businesses in processes of agricultural restructuring, Marsden *et al.* (1987) called for the use of case histories in order to be able to account for multiple causes of change and to *suggest* prevailing patterns. While they cannot be representative, the depth involved in case histories is particularly insightful for the understanding of processes. The case histories referred to in what follows are based on face-to-face interviews carried out in 2004 with 13 businesses in British horticultural production and one involved in first-stage processing. I spent two days onsite with the latter company and with three grower businesses (involved respectively in the supply of salad onions, strawberries and hardy shrubs), interviewing five directors, seven managers, five labour contractors and 36 workers.

In what follows particular attention is paid to employers' (including labour contractors') perspectives and the 'logic of capital'. This contributes to addressing the lacuna of such analysis in migration studies, as highlighted by Krissman (2005). Krissman argued that mainstream studies have focused almost entirely on the supply side, in turn sustaining policy responses that emphasise greater policing of international borders. This has the effect of making migrant workers more desirable to employers than they would be if all were regularised. In contrast, according to Krissman, a greater research focus on the practices of employers and labour contractors in hiring migrants would lead to a stronger case for regulating capital.

As this paper suggests, with respect to horticulture such an agenda should not be concerned with the practices of growers and labour contractors alone, but also with the companies that buy their products. The case histories drawn on here are suggestive of the importance of relations between different branches of capital in driving the intensification of workplace regimes. They are deliberately taken from a range of businesses that have (so far) survived in the cut-throat world of retail supply of fresh fruit, vegetables, salads and ornamentals in contemporary Britain.

INTENSIFICATION OF BRITISH HORTICULTURAL WORKPLACE REGIMES

Switching to foreign nationals in the workforce

International migrant workers in British agriculture long predate the arrival of corporate retailers. Employers regarded them as 'indispensable', for example, in the middle of the nineteenth century (Collins, 1976: 55). Seasonal migration by Irish workers was particularly common (Johnson, 1967).

Since the 1990s, there has been a general increase in the employment of foreign nationals across economic sectors in Britain (Anderson *et al.*, 2006: 6). However, a recent comparison of employers' use of migrant labour in five sectors found that the structure of demand in agriculture had particular characteristics (Dench *et al.*, 2006).⁴ Firstly, the preference for migrant workers was much stronger in agriculture; secondly, only in agriculture did employers unequivocally see migrant workers as 'crucial' to their businesses; and thirdly, agricultural employers were the most hostile to the phasing-out of temporary migration schemes under the British government's new points-based system (*ibid*: 34, 35, 70).⁵

Our case histories suggest that, while there has been a decline in the availability of long-term residents, including British nationals, and an increase in migrant workers willing to work in the sector, the main reason for this structure of demand lies in the relations between growers and retailers. The buyer-driven structure of the horticultural supply chain has enabled retailers to appropriate ever-greater value from horticultural producers (Competition Commission, 2000; Lawrence, 2004). This has meant declining margins available for growers on each unit of output. Many producers of fresh fruit and vegetables

have gone out of business, as evidenced by the shrinking and increasingly concentrated structure of the fresh fruit and vegetable sectors (Key Note, 2004). Others have sought what they saw as the only viable way forward: to supply greater volumes, through intensifying production and becoming involved in the packing and primary processing not only of their own products, but also of imports.

‘Quality’ has been at least as important as volume and price in the governance of retailer-supplier relations. The 1990 Food Safety Act effectively enshrined in statute regulation by retailers of the phytosanitary conditions of production and packing. Quality has also come to be used to refer to the increasingly precise standardisation of size, shape, texture and colour. This has influenced change in workplace regimes aimed at intensifying workers’ effort in harvesting and packing only those products that fulfilled the criteria. For example, some fruit growers now impose penalties on workers who consistently select fruit that do not satisfy the criteria. Growers are under particular pressure if they do not have their own packhouse, as the packhouse owners can reject produce on ‘quality’ grounds, when there is a surplus of fruit. Interviews revealed how the supermarket governance of the chain through the language of ‘quality’ fed through into a demand by growers for particular ‘qualities’ in the workforce. In particular, workers were sought who would be reliable, flexible and compliant. For the growers we interviewed, all these ‘qualities’ were more likely to be found in foreign workers.

Several growers described a shift from employing British nationals (including local workers, Travellers⁶ and longer-distance commuters) to including greater use of foreign nationals. This is exemplified by the testimony of one vegetable grower in the East Midlands:

‘they [British nationals] always basically want[ed] to do as little as possible for as much as possible and they thought it was demeaning work. I think they felt that we felt they were inferior citizens, basically, which of course is absolute nonsense....I think one of the reasons why the Eastern Europeans have come and work so well is because they do have somewhat higher intellect and their understanding, OK, even the language scenarios, of what we’re after and what the marketplace is after....once you’ve got over any initial misunderstandings of what the job’s about, they are consistently capable of producing high quality. With the English cauliflower harvesters that we used to use, we’d be fighting a battle to try and maintain quality and that’s hard work....whereas with the Eastern Europeans, generally, once we’ve set a standard they will stick with it....[We can] rely on them to produce quality.’ (Director, East Midlands grower, April 2004).

A second East Midlands grower, a producer of salad leaves, explained how supermarket-driven intensification had led that company from using commuters (British nationals) to foreign nationals employed under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS):⁷

‘we are talking about wanting people to work for us from March to the end of November, whereas prior to that we had gangs in to do work but they would be

much shorter duration....The way we used to work, if it was wet they didn't come. We are a different game now. We've got certain customers every day. Weather isn't an issue.'

'I think the other thing was there was a throwback to the miners' strike....[But] these people used to come at half past eight and go about half past two or three o'clock which was a very short day, and in terms of what we're doing now we need a longer working day.' (Director, East Midlands grower, April 2004).

Growers of other crops in other regions also made direct connections between the specifications made by the large retailers, and the nationality of workers who worked at their site. According to one sweetcorn grower:

'We wouldn't have dared grow unless we could have solved the labour problem. If we couldn't get the labour, we would have stopped instantaneously because we cannot compete [as employers] with baggage handlers at Gatwick, no way. I mean [in] our discipline we need to work on Sundays; people need to be at work together so they all start at the same time; you can't run a gang of four or five if two are missing and that's what happens with the Brits. They go on the piss on a Saturday night and you wouldn't see them on a Sunday. Absolutely hopeless....You see, our business has nearly all been supermarket business and delivering what you say you are going to do on time in the right this, that and the other is absolutely essential. Without that you wouldn't be asked to do anything for them....you need dead reliable people. I mean, agriculture is very unforgiving. You can't stop the clock.' (Director, South East grower, April 2004).

There are several reasons why international migrants may be particularly vulnerable (see Hugo, 2007) and therefore why this growth in their use represents an important instance of intensification through innovation in workplace regimes. Firstly, there is the issue of immigration status. As in the US (Wells, 1996; Martin, 2002; Guthman, 2004; Wells and Villarejo, 2004) state regulation played a critical role in the supply of foreign nationals to agriculture, creating a number of different immigration statuses. Each of these defined the rights to work and residence of the migrant workers concerned. In the British case, these included the status defined by the SAWS scheme and its predecessors (Kay and Miles, 1992; Tenaglia, 2004), the creation (de Genova, 2002) of the illegal immigrant (including people who overstayed or worked beyond the remit of their visas) and the opening of the US labour market that acceded to the EU on that date.⁸

The SAWS quota grew from 5,500 permits at its inception in 1990, to 25,000 in 2004. This was reduced to 16,250 for 2005 because of the inflow of workers expected following EU enlargement. In the event, 10% of the 345,000 workers registering in employment as

accession country nationals between enlargement on 1 May 2004 and 31 December 2005 registered with employers in agriculture or fishing (Gilpin *et al.* 2006: 20).⁹ In general, vulnerability is likely to be enhanced for workers employed outside the terms of their immigration status. It is much riskier for such workers to try to seek redress (Anderson and Rogaly, 2005).

A second important source of vulnerability for foreign nationals is lack of information. They may in fact have the right to work, to move jobs and to be employed in any sector, but may not know that they do (Pontes, 2005). Lack of information is connected to the length of stay in the country and, in Britain, to English language skills. Indeed, both these factors can in themselves operate to reduce vulnerability, as, through longer periods of residence, international migrants are likely to become more aware of their rights, the rules of the game, and commonly accepted ways of bending them (Anderson *et al.*, 2006). English language skills have made it possible for international migrant workers to negotiate better within particular workplaces:

‘it makes a big difference if you can speak English. If you talk with English people they will be happy. They will say morning and bye. You get better jobs. My boyfriend understands English – it is another thing to speak it [as I do]. He gets better jobs because of me. Some people have to work outside in the rain. At the break they are shivering. It’s not a pleasure. But me and my boyfriend have been under cover in the rain.’ (Lithuanian gang worker, female, August 2004)

It is important to note therefore that vulnerability cannot be read off from immigration status. Furthermore, workers may be making trade-offs between short-term pain and long-term gain, being willing to put up with the hard work and long and uncertain hours often involved in horticultural work in exchange for relatively high earnings (when converted into the currency operating in their home country) and/or English language acquisition. Such conscious trade-offs are particularly likely to be the case for migrant workers who are university students in their own countries and may have professional aspirations.

A postal survey was conducted in 2005 and received returns from 120 agriculture and food-processing employers (Ruhs *et al.*, 2006). It found that labour costs averaged 30% of total production costs (*ibid*: 68). Furthermore, ‘work ethic’ was the most commonly given reason why employers in these sectors preferred migrants of particular nationalities (*ibid*: 78,

Figure 3.3). As well as being valued for hard work, foreign nationals are also being used as enforcers of intensified workplace regimes:

‘We are also short of supervisors: people who can monitor quality, who can direct the jobs more, motivate workers, identify those workers who can be lost from the gang, de-employed. If we can find some of these, we may be able to get the most out of new immigrants.’ (Senior Manager, East Ornamentals grower, August 2004).

Foreign nationals have thus been used in different ways as instruments of newly intensified workplace regimes in horticulture. In spite of the trade-offs this may have involved for workers, and the varying degrees of worker agency in the workplace, the growth in employment of foreign nationals in the sector has reflected above all a combination of:

- (i) regulation by the private interests of corporate retailers summed up by the transposition of a discourse of product quality into growers’ search for the right quality of worker;
- (ii) state regulation of labour supply through migration policy; and
- (iii) lack of effective state regulation of retailer-supplier relations.

However, the ways in which growers have intensified workplace regimes extend beyond the demand for particular kinds of workers. In the next subsection I consider changes in the use of labour contractors and gang labour.

Labour contractors (Gangmasters)

In Britain as elsewhere, there is a long history of using labour contractors as sources of temporary labour for harvest work and for other seasonal peaks in labour demand in agriculture (see, e.g., Churchill, 1990; Banaji, 1992; Wells, 1996; Frances, 2003; Brass, 2004; Pollard, 2006). The demand by growers for the services of labour contractors derives in part from agriculture’s particular relationship with nature. The mismatch between production time and labour time in labour-intensive crop production makes it economically unviable for a constant number of workers to be hired around the year. From a grower’s perspective, using labour contractors provides a means of adjusting numbers so that workers are available when required, yet are not being paid when there is insufficient work. Moreover, labour contractors may be able to provide transport and supervision for the spatial stretch that is often involved in agricultural production.

The presence of labour contractors *per se* was used as an indicator of exploitative labour relations by Guthman (2004), who revealed that they are relied upon heavily by organic growers in certain regions of California. Indeed, if labour contractors hoard information about jobs and access to them, or, as is often the case in contemporary agriculture, provide the only means of transport available to the workplace, workers easily become dependent on them. This dependence can be magnified when contractors are also key providers of credit or of accommodation, the latter being especially important for newly arrived migrant workers, or when they are connected to international recruitment agencies. In Britain, lack of English can also be another cause of dependence on gangmasters or their staff.

For growers who used them, gangmasters brought new opportunities for fine-tuning their workplace regimes in response to supermarket demands. 'They can easily be turned on and they can easily be turned off.'¹⁰ For a West Midlands salad onions grower:

'[i]t was a revelation that we could give an order the afternoon before and labour would be there the next day. Also that one could write out one cheque for all the labour rather than going through PAYE....The crop has not really changed over the years. The change is that more preparation is needed. Supermarkets impose more quality standards – products must be the same size and length.' (Director, West Midlands grower, August 2004).

Yet, as their long historical presence implies, the presence of labour contractors does not necessarily indicate workplace intensification. Rather, the case histories recorded in 21st century Britain are suggestive of *changes in the type of gangmaster business* consistent with an overall intensification of workplace regimes. Indeed, a combination of new licensing legislation and downward pressure on overheads seemed to be causing older, smaller businesses to fold.

In February 2004, the attention of government had turned to new legislation to regulate gangmasters, following the death of workers at Morecambe Bay, and the impetus that tragedy had given to the Private Members' Bill aimed at the creation of a new licensing regime.¹¹ An unlikely grouping of unions, supermarkets, non-governmental organisations and government officials worked together on the Act under the auspices of the Ethical Trading Initiative's Temporary Labour Working Group. Key to its success was the backing of the large supermarkets, who were vitally concerned with protecting their public image (and

by extension their customer base and market share) (see Freidberg, 2004). As a result of the Act, the Gangmaster Licensing Authority came into force in September 2006.

The new law made it an offence to use labour provided by an unlicensed gangmaster. So gangmasters increasingly had to show they were not cutting corners, for example on wage payments or non-wage benefits such as holiday pay, nor charging excess fees for transport, or exorbitant rents on accommodation. Gangmaster businesses were squeezed from another direction by growers facing ever tighter margins. While gangmasters saw that compliance with the new Gangmaster (Licensing) Act would cause their costs to rise, growers resisted paying a higher percentage fee per worker.¹²

Kevin, a white British gangmaster providing labour to an east of England ornamentals company (turnover £6.5 m in 2003-04), had inherited the business from his father 12 years earlier. The gang had shrunk from 24 to eight core members. Kevin said he made his margins from holiday pay and appeared especially anxious about his business coming under official scrutiny. 'When the new legislation comes in and gangmasters are investigated a bit more, that will be it, finished...I pay two weeks holiday pay when I ought to pay four.'

Another source of pressure is the customer, the ornamentals company, which has refused to raise the overhead paid to Kevin from 28% to 33%. 'I told him [the director] that both our fathers were now in the ground and that your father had been happy to pay my father 33%...I will stop business if overheads don't go up.' Kevin explained that the director also objected to the high turnover of the non-core workers in the gang, which was a strategy by Kevin to avoid reaching the minimum threshold for employer's National Insurance contributions. The director told us he wanted 'gangs to deliver regular, reliable people to come in daily'. But he was also aware that the employer's National Insurance contributions may represent the gangmaster's margin. 'You know and I know that the gangmaster can't do everything correctly on 28% if he is paying holiday pay etc.'

Another gang, working at the same company as Kevin, and made up of white British men and women, had been formed by workers themselves. The gangmasters Helen and Alice faced pressure from the company's attempt to fine-tune labour deployment. The gang had started as a worker takeover:

‘I had been working for another gangmaster, an arsehole. I don’t like the way he treated us. His father was a director of [names grower]. I was a single parent living in [a nearby village]. We [the gang workers] had a meeting in a shed and then asked [the ornamentals grower] whether we’d be guaranteed work [if we formed our own gang]. It was February 13th 1991 or 1992.’ (Helen, gangmaster, August 2004)

For Helen it was key that she and Alice worked alongside workers in their gang, although this had the downside that workers knew they could get their way. For example, if they kept nagging, ‘can we have a fag break?’¹³ they would get it. The core group had known each other for a long time. Helen described how the manager expected them to reduce their numbers as the season came to an end each September. ‘We have had to lay people off and we’ve felt terrible’. The new senior manager, who had been recruited specifically to maximise the efficient use of labour, approached Alice and told her she had to lay off two specific workers that night. ‘And he wonders why they don’t come to work the following year.’

In contrast, the new gangs were larger, often regional or even national operations, with multiple customers and gangmasters who were rarely seen at the work site. Instead, leaders were selected from the workforce provided to each company. While there is no evidence that this kind of gangmaster is any more or less likely to abuse workers, the case histories suggest they are more likely to provide accommodation, a source of profit and a means of labour control. The new gangmasters are, it seems, more likely to take advantage of the specific vulnerabilities of migrant workers. According to Kevin, the gangmaster whose business was tottering, ‘The future of gangmastering lies in foreign labour. Gangmasters that house workers are making money.’

Lina, a Polish national, was employed by the new gangmaster at the fruit handling and floretting company. Until two weeks before the interview, she and her boyfriend had lived in the village where the gangmaster was located. She had just moved to a nearby town where they now lived in houses rented from the gangmaster and were paying £45 per week each sharing a room with another worker: ‘It is not good’. They were now looking for a flat to rent separately.

However, another worker, a Lithuanian national, found that the 2004 implementation of legislation on illegal working (The Immigration (Restrictions on Employment) Order),

together with EU enlargement, had changed the employment practices of some gangmasters for the better.

‘At the moment here [UK] is better. After May 1st I’m paying tax and insurance. Before it was different. All gangmasters took 10% from wages. If you asked gangmasters then why they did not take tax and national insurance from wages, they would say, “if you don’t like my job, you go”.’ (Eva, Lithuanian gang worker)

Thus, for accession country nationals, there are likely to have been advantages from EU enlargement and the associated changes in their immigration status (see Anderson *et al.*, 2006), and all workers in the sector may have benefited from the Gangmaster (Licensing) Act. Yet, inasmuch as the retailer-driven pressure on margins faced by the small-scale gangmasters I spoke to is experienced by all gangmasters, there is likely to be a continuing squeeze on workers. This can be seen through the changing operation of labour arrangements based on piece rates.

Piece Rates

In England and Wales, wage payments to workers in agriculture are subject to minimum hourly rates governed by the Agricultural Wages Board (AWB). In contrast to the detailed regulation of hourly wages, for which agriculture continues to be regarded as a special case, there is no specification of piece rates according to crop, task or season. Instead, government policy requires that piece rates be set such that a worker’s earnings equate each day to at least the relevant minimum wage for that worker, taking account of the number of hours worked. This gives scope for undercutting the minimum wage (Gidwani, 2001).

Although the use of piece rates in British horticulture long predated the current wave of foreign nationals working in the sector,¹⁴ for one strawberry grower there was a connection. British nationals were not willing to put in the hard work:

‘Let’s face it, it’s hard graft out there, you know, picking strawberries...it’s piece work, too, and you know, people just aren’t used to that. They’ve got a very cushy lifestyle as an employee in Britain and that’s what they’ve been brought up to expect. The other groups have got no such illusions. They come along and think, “this is my opportunity to make money” and they take it. The difference is, I have an English person who is making less than minimum wage, which means that I’ve then got to make up the difference to make it legal and that means the price that I’m having to pay to get a punnet of strawberries might be [48 to 55 cents] 26 to 30

pence per pound. And I've got another guy on piece work [at the same rate] getting [33 cents] 18 pence a pound, making £10 an hour, from Lithuania or Estonia or wherever.' (Owner-cultivator of strawberries, West Midlands, May 2004)

The east Midlands salad grower also saw piece rates and the employment of international migrant workers as part of a package:

'I accept [piece work] is a very crude way of motivating people, but it works, and I don't see anything shameful about that....These people come here for economic reasons in the main, and not only that, they are going to fund their own education or they are going to struggle very hard. Here, they have the opportunity to earn good money.' (April 2004)

Filip, the Polish worker who had returned to the ornamentals company after a five-year gap, felt that the increase in foreign workers was connected to the availability of piece rates.

'There is an increase in foreign workers mainly due to the money workers can make, and employers can make better money from them...Foreign workers, because of the piece rate, will work much faster as well'.¹⁵

Taken as a whole, our interviews suggest that piece rates, long used for harvest work (Ortiz and Aparicio, 2006), have played an important part in workplace regimes. Firstly, there is some evidence that they have been introduced for tasks previously paid at a time rate to speed up work and enhance labour control. Secondly, there is evidence of decline in the rates themselves, linked to the reduced margins growers have been obtaining from retailers for each unit of produce.

A sweetcorn grower in the southeast of England brought in piece rates to accompany mechanisation of harvesting:

'The problem with sweetcorn [plants] six foot high is you could never tell if [workers] got lost and they'd come and ask for another stint. It was a nightmare [to know]...whether they had actually done it or [got] fed up with it and just picked a little bit around the bin...[Now] they get paid by the bin, it's quite hard work...and you would make them go from one end of the field to the other so you could identify precisely whose row [had been picked by whom]...so [you] could give those who didn't do a good job a warning and you also knew which bins they picked'. (April 2004)

Whereas this sweetcorn grower measured and remunerated the work of *individuals*, Deep, the gangmaster supplying workers to the West Midlands salad onion company, paid piece rates according to the output of the *group*. Deep received payment from the grower per box

of harvested and field-prepared onions. The grower had told us that the price they received per unit had declined in cash terms by two-sevenths between 1999 and 2004. This pressure had been passed on to Deep through a reduction in piece rates. For one type of harvesting and field preparation process, Deep said the rate had declined from £8 per box in 1999 to £7.20 in 2003. Whereas in that year he claimed he had paid the workers £6.50 per box, in 2004 he had started at £6 and reduced the rate to £5.50 within two months.¹⁶

One manifestation of the intensification was the search for workers who were able and willing to work with care and effort to turn a declining piece rate into at least the national minimum wage. For Conrad, senior manager at the east of England ornamentals company, this meant somebody 'not too young because they are not driven enough....somebody who has got material needs'. Because of the minimum wage floor, the SAWS workers that the ornamentals company had been using were:

'...underperforming every day....Apart from the individuals who have a drive to work and want to save as much as they can, and there are some, the others want to take advantage of the minimum wage as a cushion. The piece rate can't pay less for less. It pays only more money for more work. We need to look for people who can respond to incentives'.

According to Alice, a gangmaster, piece rates at this grower had declined by 15% since 1998. That there had been a reduction was borne out by the junior manager, Sabrina, who had herself been a piece worker when she had worked in a gang on the site in the 1980s. She remembered having been able to earn the equivalent of a day's pay in a morning. 'You should be getting a day's pay by lunch...rates...have gone down to make people work harder for their money'. Sabrina reported that in 2004, workers on piece rates only just made their day's wages after a full day's work. If they worked overtime, the rate did not change. 'In my day I still worked well in the afternoon but didn't kill myself...'. Now workers 'might not even make their wage'. Marta, a SAWS worker at another strawberry grower, reported earning just £6 on her worst day of the year, after working three to four hours. The senior manager at the company told us he had been advised by a horticultural industry group to record less hours worked in such circumstances.

The six SAWS workers interviewed at this company were, however, ambivalent about the intensity of work involved in picking strawberries on a piece rate basis. All talked about

maximising their earnings over the period of the SAWS permit. Marta, now on her second season as a SAWS worker, preferred the employment she had had the previous year:

‘There were 17 students – much better accommodation...you got work for more hours and on more days. Sometimes there were no days off in a week....I earned more than £6,000 because we worked a lot, sometimes twelve hour days with no days off.’

Vincent, a Rwandan medical student studying in Ukraine, came to Britain on the SAWS scheme with the aim of saving £2,000. So far he had earned £2,500 and saved £1,800 of it. He spent £10 per week on food.

However, all the students found the strawberry harvesting very hard work, and were relieved at least occasionally to work in the processing factory on a time rate, which meant lower earnings, but was, according to Eugenia, a Bulgarian law student, ‘a little rest’. She said that strawberry picking was ‘a difficult job...I know I have to work and I just knew that it will be hard...strawberry picking is not good for the back’. What Eugenia most objected to was the intense supervision. If the tray of strawberries was underweight or there was a high incidence of bruising, ‘the supervisor shouts your number’ which is ‘not pleasant’.

In his study of piecework in Indian agriculture, Gidwani (2001) found group-based piecework to be higher status for some groups of workers and less damaging to their self-esteem than more individualised employment relations such as these. However, at the fruit-handling and brassica floretting site, group-based rates did not have this effect as they were not known by workers. Payment by the director was calculated according to output, but the Yorkshire gangmaster, Simon, claimed he was not told the rate. The director ‘has got his own system’. A Lithuanian worker, Susan, working for another gangmaster, said similarly that she thought it was piece work but did not know how the rates were calculated. Jim, a white British ex-miner in his 40s, said the rate was ‘[55 to 73 cents] 30 to 40 pence per box of apples, and more or less the same for oranges, I think’. He collected his wages from the gangmaster’s mother’s house in the village.

While neither British nor foreign nationals were told actual piece rates at the handling and floretting site, some British workers at the ornamentals company working on hourly rates were resentful of the piece rates they saw being paid to foreign nationals. According to Alice, her ‘workers get angry when they see a lot of foreigners doing the piece work’. One

worker told us that when a gang of foreign nationals working on piece rates had come into despatch, the company cut the amount of overtime available by half. It seems that at the ornamentals site, the extension of piece rates in the workplace regime may also have enhanced labour control through creating envy between groups of workers.

Overall, the data suggest that the introduction of piece rates (for work roles previously paid at an hourly rate) and reductions in the rates themselves have been important innovations to increase labour control for horticultural businesses and labour contractors. The indirect regulation of piece rates via the notional calculation of an hourly minimum wage, together with ever tighter 'quality' criteria, encouraged further intensification through increasing the speed, care and effort required to meet the minimum earnings target. There is evidence that some workers found it hard to achieve this target some of the time, and earned less than the hourly minimum they were entitled to. Yet, workers were ambivalent about pieces rates, with a strong strand of opinion welcoming the 'opportunity' to maximise earnings.

CONCLUSION

This paper has used case histories from the British horticultural sector to suggest an ongoing process of change towards intensification of workplace regimes. It appears to be evidenced by the growers' search for certain types of worker who, seeking to maximise earnings, are willing to work hard to close, detailed instructions and are available for the amount of time required and no more. For some growers, this could mean workers that are willing to accept being informed of the availability of work only the night before for an uncertain number of hours, while for others it may involve finding workers that will stay for a number of weeks or months,¹⁷ or including some that can themselves be used as instruments of labour control. At root, the drive for intensification of labour control has been caused largely by corporate retailers' regulation of workplace regimes in the sector through their requirements for volume, 'quality' and low margins (for growers). To create the workforce they need to fulfil this in the 21st century, growers have significantly increased the proportion of international migrant workers employed in the sector. They have ratcheted up the effort required from workers to achieve the minimum wage through the introduction of piece work to new areas, and pushed down the rates earned per unit output. Some growers using gangmasters have

switched to a reliance on large scale operators, seen as more likely to provide the 'right kind of worker'.

In spite of the power of corporate retailers in this process, the British state, too, has had an important influence on changing horticultural workplace regimes. Indeed, the two are inseparable as the rise of supermarket power over the last 50 years has been enabled by the retailers' relationship with the state, ranging from government-funded visits by directors of Tesco and Sainsbury to the US after the Second World War to study emerging multiple grocery stores there, through the end of resale price maintenance in the 1960s following intense supermarket pressure (Bevan, 2005), to the passing of the Food Safety Act. More recently, the state allowed Walmart, the world's largest retailer, into the UK sector and made no effective regulatory response to evidence of oligopsony buyer-power in supermarket-supplier relations in the 2000 Competition Commission report on supermarkets. Among the interests at play here, the state has a political interest in reducing food prices (and retail price inflation in general)¹⁸ and retailers have been handed a lead role in bringing this about.

However, as we have seen, the structure of demand for fresh fruit and vegetables has provided opportunities for growers that are able to fulfil the necessary requirements, through growth in volume. The demand for foreign workers has meant valued employment and earnings for some of those workers. The state as regulator of migration policy has also had more than one kind of impact on workplace regimes. Foreign nationals came with a variety of immigration statuses (e.g. 'illegally' resident, SAWS worker, EU accession country national on the Workers' Registration Scheme) with different implications for labour control. The SAWS scheme and (in a very different way) 'illegal' working seem to favour growers by effectively constraining workers' labour market mobility, while the free movement components of European Union enlargement and the new status of accession country workers have, for some foreign nationals, increased their capacity to seek jobs across the economy (Anderson *et al.*, 2006) and to seek redress in instances of employment abuse.

This begins to hint at some of the complexity involved in developing a national picture of horticultural employment relations involving migrant workers, especially in a period of rapid

change. As Martin put it in relation to the US, '[a]griculture is a...diverse employer...so there is a wide variety of employer-employee relationships' (Martin, 1988: 11). Class dynamics in horticulture are further complicated by the contradictory class position of many growers, that, facing one way, see value being appropriated by those who buy their produce, and, facing the other, seek ever more intensified workplace regimes to maximise the surplus value from their workforce. With regard to labour contractors, 'some are honest brokers between growers and workers and many are not' (Martin, 1988). An understanding of why certain kinds of production relations prevail under particular conditions 'involves exposing the heterogeneity and fluidity of social and institutional forms of economic activity and assessing how space influences outcomes' (Marsden *et al.*, 1996: 362).

Thus a first step for further research in Britain on the relationships I have explored in this paper would be the development of studies of labour relations in the production of particular commodities. The turnover time of capital is not constant across agriculture, nor even across the horticultural subsector. At the most basic level, there are likely to be important differences between crops with a single short annual harvest, and those which are picked across many months; between workplace regimes involving fieldwork alone, and those where packhouse and primary processing work also feature. A new generation of British studies of horticultural workplace regimes could also focus on localities and regions to try to explain differences associated with place, and on the significance of the size of growers' businesses.

Alongside such studies, ethnographic work involving long-term engagement and time spent alongside workers (both foreign and British nationals), and, where possible, growers and gangmasters, too, is needed to elucidate migration histories, and the consequences of interaction between differently positioned individuals and groups of workers for worker solidarity and/or further labour market segmentation. Future academic research could have an important role in undermining the commodity fetishism entailed in rendering working conditions in horticulture invisible and irrelevant to 'consumers'. It can also play its part in countering representations and over-generalisations of horticultural workers' positions either as an exploited and powerless class, or as free individuals following ever-increasing opportunities for employment and upward mobility.¹⁹

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¹ See also Lang and Heasman (2004), Wrigley (1987).

² Although a small number of other studies have focused on this. See, for example, Frances and Gansey (1996), Lawrence (2004), Pai (2004), and Pollard (2006). The UK does, of course, have its own literature on agricultural employment relations including Collins (1967), Grieco (2006), Howkins (1990), Johnson (1967) and Newby (1977).

³ These include, among many others, Friedland *et al.* (1981), Henderson (1998), Martin (1998, 2002), McWilliams (1945), Mitchell (1996), and Wells (1996).

⁴ The other sectors studied by Dench *et al.* were construction; administration, business and management; finance and accountancy; and hotels and catering.

⁵ See <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/command-points-based-migration?view=Binary> [accessed 21 July 2006]

⁶ Travellers worked alongside rural and urban labourers in fruit and vegetable arms on the Welsh borders, in Scottish berry fields, and picking hops in Kent and Hampshire (Whyte, 1979; Taylor, 2008).

⁷ A scheme providing temporary six-month work permits to non-European Union nationals currently registered as students outside the UK specifically for work in the agricultural sector. However, since January 2007, the scheme has also been available to nationals of the most recently acceded EU countries, Bulgaria and Romania, who need not be students.

⁸ The other two, Cyprus and Malta, already had such access.

⁹ Not all of these workers were entering Britain or employment in the agricultural sector at the time of registering. For workers already in place, the Workers Registration Scheme was a form of regularisation of their status. There was a skewed regional distribution of agricultural sector registrations, with high proportions of total registrations being in this sector in Kent, the Marches, Norfolk, Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire and the Grampians.

¹⁰ Large-scale lettuce grower, East of England, April 2004.

¹¹ Introduced before Morecambe Bay by the Transport and General Workers' Union-sponsored MP, Jim Sheridan.

¹² For another specific instance of this, see Dench *et al.* (2006: 63).

¹³ 'Fag break': a work break to smoke a cigarette.

¹⁴ Indeed, piece rates are common currency in the agricultural sector worldwide (see Ortiz, 2002).

¹⁵ Interviewed August 2004.

¹⁶ He explained that the change in the rate during the season was justified by workers' increased speed as they became used to the task.

¹⁷ Business sometimes requires a captive labour force, which is not necessarily delivered by mobile workers (Mitchell, 2005: 85).

¹⁸ *Financial Times*, 18 February 2005, p.3

¹⁹ Indeed, variations between seasons in the importance of timeliness of labour supply can shift the relative power of workers and growers across the year.

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